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Convincing photos make case against Nicaragua

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THE REAGAN ADMINISTRATION has irrefutable proof that the Sandinista regime is lying when it denies that Nicaraguan territory is being used, with Cuban help, to funnel large amounts of arms and trained guerrilla manpower into the Salvadoran insurgency.

But in the face of widespread public skepticism both here and abroad, the administration delayed until this week in revealing the aerial photography that shows the extent of the internal Nicaraguan military buildup. The Reagan team is still wrestling with the dilemma of how to disclose the equally hard evidence of extensive Sandinista support to the Salvadoran guerrillas, without blowing intelligence sources and methods.

The recent inadvertent use by Secretary of State Haig of a phony photograph to prove the Sandinistas guilty of atrocities made it appear that the administration was grasping at straws to prove its case. But, in fact, long before this week's public showing of the photography, the State Department had been extraordinarily successful in using this evidence behind the scenes to make true believers

of even the most hardened skeptics in foreign countries.

Last year, Haig was quick to recognize the critical importance of the European and Latin American social democratic parties in forming opinion toward events in Central America. Since these parties had initially celebrated the Sandinista overthrow of Somoza as a democratic liberation, they were reluctant to believe that hard-line Marxists had taken over, and Haig assigned his brightest aides and best ambassadors to changing minds. In a series of secret briefings over many months, what most impressed socialists like Felipe Gonzalez of Spain and Carlos Andres Perez of Venezuela was the American overhead photography, some of which was finally shown the American public this week. The skeptical socialists could see with their own eyes how Nicaragua was being steadily transformed into a menacing arsenal.

The Russian and Cuban derivation of the armament was so clear in the photography that Sandinista denials of dependency on Soviet arms lost all credibility. Aerial photographs showing burned out Miskito Indian villages corroborated charges of extensive repression.

To the question of why such convincing evidence has been secretly shown to foreigners but withheld so long from the American public, Reagan officials reply that in private briefings photographs can be shown and then retrieved, while once published in the press they become available to everybody, including the Soviets.

The guardians of the most advanced American satellite technology remain convinced that the U.S. still has a commanding lead in the precision of its high-resolution photography. To expose to the Russians the full extent of that advantage by allowing them to study actual photographs would, it is feared, give them invaluable help in refining their deception and camouflage techniques. It is for this

reason that none of the advanced satellite photography was included in this week's public briefing.

Since it is less accurate, the photography from high-flying U-2 planes does not have to be withheld from Soviet scrutiny. Its release to the American public was long delayed because of State Department concern that its publication might be taken as an admission that the U.S. has engaged in unauthorized flights over Nicaragua. With his credibility now on the line, President Reagan finally moved to break this impasse and to order release of the U-2 photographs.

As the administration has clearly implied in its accusations that the logistical flow and battlefield strategy in El Salvador are being controlled from sites in Nicaragua, the arcane and super-secret National Security Agency must have some access to Sandinista lines of communication. This irrefutable proof of Sandinista command and control has been closely held for obvious reasons, but CIA Director William Casey has presented it in detail recently to the House and Senate intelligence committees.

These two bipartisan committees, with their specially-cleared staffs and full access to all intelligence information, come close to being an impartial court of last resort on intelligence matters. However, the American and foreign media gave little coverage last week to the significance of the fact that the chairmen of both committees reported that there was "convincing" evidence that the Sandinista government is training, arming and supporting the Salvadoran insurgents with Cuban help.

With this bipartisan congressional finding clearly on the record after an impartial review of all the evidence, there is plenty of room for debate among Americans as to what to do about Nicaraguan intervention but no reasonable doubt that this intervention is a massive and continuing reality.